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Manchester College, Oxford.

THOUGHTS ON THE MINISTRY IN UNQUIET TIMES.

The Visitor's Address

BY

W. H. DRUMMOND,

At the close of the Previous Session,

21st June, 1923.

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Thoughts on the Ministry in Unquiet Times.

A few days ago I laid forcible hands upon myself in order to obtain the quiet necessary for the preparation of this address. My first conclusion, and it is one which many of you will probably share in a short time, was that I had placed myself in a ridiculous position by consenting to deliver it. I have a fairly long memory of venerable predecessors, who point a warning finger at me; for they were men of learning and piety, who could hold out gracious hands of guidance across the barriers which separate College life from the career of the settled ministry. The "settled ministry"—it is a phrase which once had a distinct meaning with an aroma not unpleasing to the aspiring candidate. But is anything "settled" now? Even the office of a minister of religion and his necessary place of honour and spiritual leadership in organized society cannot be taken for granted. If this sounds a little dangerous and subversive, I can only plead two things as my excuse for saying it. First, like many other unwelcome heresies, it is possible that it is true. And second, I find that I cannot speak sincerely from what may be called an inside or professional point of view. That is why I am so doubtful about my qualifications for what is expected of me. For a long time my life and its most stirring interests have not been confined to the ordinary grooves of the ministry. In the fiery experience of recent years many things which I once valued have been destroyed, or appear now to be quite unimportant. I am not so much interested in the niceties of theological learning as I used to be. If I was ever lured by the cold but lofty passion of Browning's grammarian, I have to confess that the enclitic δε has lost some of its fascination for me. But in spite of my ancestry I doubt whether I was ever intended for the cloistered paths of academic learning. The great

world of ordinary men and women has seemed to me more interesting and significant, and I have valued religion chiefly as a method of salvation and not as a system of theology or a key to the universe.

My own course was determined for me when, under what after the lapse of years I can only regard as divine leading, I turned aside from a proffered opening for cultivated preaching and pleasant friendship in order to share the tragedy and comedy of life in their most elemental forms in a city slum. That experience has remained with me always as one of the central things in life, and when in later years it was in some danger of being overlaid by the literary habits of an editor and my own inherited passion for books, it was renewed and immeasurably enriched by the spiritual opportunities which were offered to me during the war in the crowded camps in France, and since that time in the stricken areas of Europe. For this reason, perhaps, I am inclined to treat the fastidious habits and the hereditary caution of prosperous middle-class religion with less reverence than many people consider their due. I even permit myself to doubt whether the polished surfaces of Oxford and the critical finesse of its intellectual life have quite the value, which is attributed to them in some quarters, for men whose aim in life is not the pursuit of humane culture in a protected area but the service of God's Kingdom in the crowded and unfenced highways of the world. Forgive this too personal introduction. It is my excuse for not speaking to you to-day chiefly as students, but as those who have heard the call to dedicate their lives to the service of God and their fellow-men, and regard the time which they spend here simply as preparatory to that end. If there are others here, friends and supporters of the College, they may listen if they like, but my words are not intended primarily for them.

One other word before I pass on. I do not wish to speak dogmatically or to be understood in that way at all. My own mind on many matters upon which I shall touch is in a fluid state. The great systems of thought and practice are breaking up like the ice-floes before the

gales of spring. We are out on stormy and uncharted seas, where courage and resource are the only way of safety. The time for clear-cut opinions, even for good working solutions, is not yet. My claim to speak to you is not that I possess the garnered wisdom of past years, but that I am a traveller who has met many problems, many cities, many men, whose mind in consequence is no longer anchored in the safe harbour of habit and tradition, but is always setting out on some new voyage of discovery, driven no doubt in some measure by restless human curiosity, but guided also, as I firmly believe, by a creative impulse, which is the gift of God to the unquiet hearts of men.

The first thing that I want to say to you is that you are happy in beginning your work at a time of such widespread unsettlement and disturbance, when there are so many difficulties to be faced and such exciting experiments to be made. If you have the right stuff in you, life is not going to be dull for you; nor can religion ever appear to you as a matter of routine. It is the supreme thing which is going to change the face of the world through you its devoted servants. I hope that you believe that with all your hearts. If not, turn back before it is too late. Let us think for a moment of the vast changes in the authority and outlook of religion, which have been taking place slowly and often unperceived during the last fifty years. The settlement which followed the upheaval of the sixteenth century and has determined the forms of our religious life and the work of the ministry, has had its foundations cut away and is rapidly falling to pieces. That settlement inherited its dogmatic temper, its accent of complete certainty, from the Middle Ages. It based its authority not upon Church law and tradition, but upon an infallible Bible. It required an order of ministers, who while they inherited some of the traditional honour and status of the mediæval priesthood owed most of their influence to the fact that they were specially trained and set apart to expound the Word of God. Of all this the large Bible resting on the pulpit cushion is the appropriate symbol. But how much of it remains as a living force in the world to-day? We are no longer people of the

Book. Science, history, philosophy, Biblical criticism, the comparative study of religions, have created an atmosphere of feeling and belief in which the old ideas, once so pregnant with vital issues for immortal souls, wilt and die. As far as I can see, there is hardly a temporary resting-place in the plea that as the Bible emerges from the crucible of the critic it gains a new and more spiritual authority to replace the old. That may be so for a few minds specially trained in the appreciation of great literature, but I am convinced that for the mass of men it is not true. For them the Bible with its sure moral guidance—"Thou shalt" and "Thou shalt not"—and its vision of a hereafter of judgment and reward, has gone. They do not read it, and its words, except as a retreating memory, do not affect their lives. And the same may be said of the massive system of dogmas which once fenced religion round like a walled city. Even when men still claim to believe them, they do so for new reasons which deprive them of most of their meaning and authority. A figure like Bossuet, magnificent and imperturbable as he confronts the rising tide of scepticism with the unchanging oracles of God, the "semper eadem" of the Church, has become impossible in the modern world. He stands with his defiant dictum "all else must yield when the Faith is concerned," a convinced imperialist in the affairs of the Spirit, on the watershed between the old and the new, and in a sense he has had no successor. Was not Pascal, with his "the heart has its reasons," his contemporary, born indeed four years before him? To-day orthodoxy takes cover in entirely new directions. Its favourite appeal is to experience. Men believe things because they like to believe them, and religion has become largely a matter of personal impressionism. I have usually read a good many books which set out to defend orthodoxy, it must be confessed in a much diluted form. I have also had opportunities of conference with men of different schools of thought upon the central doctrines of Christianity. What has struck me continually is the absence of any final court of appeal to whose decrees they must bow. Often they rely chiefly upon what are known as judgments of value.

"Jesus is God," it is said, not because this statement is infallibly true like the law of gravitation, but "Jesus is God because he has the value of God for me." Could we have a better indication of the confusion into which we are plunged, how far off we are from any common body of teaching or doctrine? In many quarters it is producing a condition of acute spiritual distress, and quack doctors of the soul, as in the later Roman Empire, are finding crowds of patients for their prescriptions. In most of the great cities of Europe orientalism in various forms has its enthusiastic votaries. New Thought makes its appeal to an age which finds it easier to be inquisitive than to be pious, while the freak and the charlatan have little difficulty in persuading weak-minded people to accept their own desires as the measure of truth. But astrology, magical incantations and other exploded forms of superstition are not going to build up a noble civilization or satisfy the hunger of the soul for God. What better thing have you to offer in this welter of decaying creeds and strange appetencies of the human spirit? That is your problem, the imperious challenge of this age to all men who desire to be ministers of religion.

There is another direction in which the work of religion is likely to be full of exciting difficulties for you. I refer to the impact of social and economic forces upon the organized life of religion. Protestant dissent and the industrial revolution have evolved a new product which may be described briefly as suburban Christianity. Its growth would form an interesting chapter in social history, and perhaps it ought to be taken in hand before it disappears. It controls the activities of religion by its social status and its economic power. It has a monopoly for its own use of the most expensive buildings and the most highly paid ministers. Not seldom it allows worldly prosperity to be the condition of spiritual honour. To a large extent it has succeeded in persuading ministers themselves that its comfortable posts of service are the reward of merit and the hall-mark of success. Now, the economic upheaval which has overtaken the life of the Western world cannot leave this state of

things undisturbed. When I entered the ministry it was still possible to accept it as natural; perhaps we were not sufficiently sensitive to all its spiritual implications, and above all to its conflict with the essential spirit of Christianity, to ask whether it is right. But serious men, who realize the terrific impact of the present religious crisis upon their ordinary habits of thought, can do so no longer. The Church has taken the New Testament to its heart. It finds there the heavenly commission of its ministers. It is a most dangerous possession, full of explosive material, as theologians have often discovered to their cost. But the effect of a return to the plain meaning of its teaching will be quite as subversive to traditional habits, social and economic, as to traditional dogmas. To a candid reader there seems to be little doubt that Jesus Christ regarded great possessions and the love of money and the power which money puts into the hands of men as a greater danger to the spiritual life than sensual sin. He showed more patience and tenderness to the victims of passion than he did to respectable worldliness. This is hard doctrine for the English Puritan conscience, and it is very unpleasing doctrine for the prosperous suburban Christian. But that is not the question. The only question that matters in these days, when at all costs we must be real, is "Is it true?" Probably most of us do not accept it, though we may shrink from putting our profound disagreement with Jesus Christ into words. But what if in the coming religious revival, which must be based upon a new moral valuation of life, men should see clearly once again its close connection with the Gospel of Love and the practice of loving-kindness? For myself I think that this is likely to happen. It seems to me to be essential if the religion of the Cross is to survive in the world, where the forces of selfishness and greed and organized social habit now paralyze it at every turn. Of course I may be mistaken, and I have no doubt that many wise and prudent leaders will assure you that I am; but I should not be dealing honestly with you if I did not tell you how much this question occupies my mind, what deep misgiving and distress of spirit it causes me, and how

anxious I am that you should face it squarely, while you are still eager to go tilting against the powers of darkness, before the cares of the world and its routine of social and economic habit have claimed you for their own. How often we speak about the burden which is lifted from men's lives when we decide to walk in the way of Christ, with his teaching as our guide, instead of believing dogmas about him. But, believe me, it is really a very difficult and a very hazardous proceeding, and will lead us into many strange places in thought and practice.

What place can the ministry take in this rapidly changing world? There is the need of staffing the churches, and there is the more adventurous path of religious experiment. Of these the latter is incomparably the more important, for if we experiment successfully and freshen life with the sense of discovery, the staffing of the churches will take care of itself. There is no ready-made place for you. You will have in these days to justify your existence and your calling all along the line. Torpid congregations may accept you, for it is their habit to do so; but the great world is very suspicious of the professional in religion. It will be your task to overcome this suspicion and to open up avenues of approach along which your thought and sympathy and love can flow into the lives of other men. Here you will be wise, without impatience and ill-considered rashness, not to trust too much to conventional methods. Some of the happiest men I know in the ministry to-day are those who are feeling their way all the time with courage and insight into new relationships with the world. They care more for human lives with their changefulness and infinite variety than for consecrated habits. There are signs of a great religious awakening; a sense that it is spiritual realities which give significance to life is coming back to men, a desire, whatever happens, to be loyal to love. But it will not be easy to guide this new movement into ecclesiastical channels. It is my own belief that many of our religious practices, even our methods of worship, will suffer a sea-change. Quite possibly the lonely authority of the pulpit will disappear and give place to something more in accord with the

spirit of fellowship, co-operative thinking, common enterprises of spiritual exploration, a real sharing of religious experience on equal terms. In all this you will have to find your place of companionable leadership, and no one can describe to you beforehand exactly the form which it is going to take, for that is to be your own discovery. You are starting at the beginning of a new era in the world's history. New forms of social and religious life are coming to the birth. No one has ever travelled this way before. That is why for the brave heart it is all so wonderful.

But I think that it is possible to say something fairly definite about the relation of these preparatory College years to the tasks which await you. Here let me dive into the wells of memory and tell you what they gave to me. Certainly they did not cram my mind with useful knowledge, which I could spill over without much effort into my sermons, nor did they teach me any tricks of the trade. For these two failures on the part of the College let me express after many years my profound gratitude. But this College did its best to impart to me three priceless gifts.

1. The first was mental training. No one could feel the influence of Manchester College as I knew it without imbibing a life-long reverence for habits of truthfulness, sincerity and accuracy, and scorn for all sloppy methods of work, pretended knowledge, short-cuts and shams. The standard of scholarship was high and exacting, and it involved hard work and severe discipline. It is the price which has to be paid, if we are to acquire habits of intellectual application and the mind is to be fashioned into a keen and swift instrument of thought. It is folly to suppose that this does not matter. It makes all the difference between good and bad work in after life, whether we are teaching philosophy, presiding at a public meeting, visiting the sick, or playing with children.

2. Moral discipline. The life we were expected to live was one of ordered habit, simplicity and self-control. We had then very plain surroundings (I am not sorry for it), very little money and no luxuries, but we had an opportunity of learning the value of deep concentration of mind and spirit upon the central things of religion.

3. Friendship. No doubt small societies suffer from some dangers and disabilities to which larger bodies are not exposed, but it seems to me that the limits of our fellowship in this place have their compensation in the closeness of the bonds which unite teacher and taught. The touch of the master-mind upon ours can be so close and sure. There are priceless opportunities for intimate talk. We live a common life of thought and aim in ways which are not possible in the more lordly palaces of learning. Of course our teachers have other and far-ranging interests; but we are at the centre with the first claim upon their time and affection. It is for us that they live, and their choicest gifts are ours for the asking. Few of us, perhaps, realize the unique value of it at the time. But it comes home to us as a priceless possession in after years.

4. But now as I look back I am aware of another gift which the College did not bestow upon me, at least as richly as my need and inexperience seemed to require. I think it was not always remembered that the ministry is one of the creative arts, with a very rich experience of preaching and teaching and the handling of human souls behind it. In this connection, do our colleges always bear in mind that they are training schools for this very difficult work of influence and creation in the world, as well as faculties of theology? I seem to remember that more time was given to teaching me Hebrew and textual criticism and the growth of dogma in the Church than to equipping me with the skill and resource necessary for organizing and controlling a large Sunday School or teaching the Bible in an interesting way to little children. It seemed to be forgotten that a large part of my future work was to be that of a teacher, and there, as a future member of the teaching profession, the College gave me little help. The result was much stumbling and fumbling in disastrous night accompanied by distressing moods of helplessness and failure. I suppose that I did learn a little from my own blunders, for a very impish Sunday scholar once paid me the compliment of saying in a stage whisper to his neighbour, "He's not as green as he looks." But I was very green and untrained

when I left College, and I am sure that I looked it. I know the familiar excuse, that it is all a matter of native personal gift. You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. But even those of us, and perhaps we are the majority, who may be compared not inaptly to a sow's ear, and possibly are so regarded by our learned and much-tried tutors, can be made a little less clumsy and commonplace by wise handling and artful training. Perhaps the difficulty lies in a certain confusion due to names. It would seem that the first aim of a theological college is to train theologians, and its finest fruit is the well-equipped scholar who can succeed in time to the professor's chair. But what of the special needs, the training for future work, of the men who are destined to be obscure ministers, teachers of very ordinary folk, common soldiers it may be in the noble army of martyrs? I confess to occasional moods of scepticism when I wonder whether our praise of the learned man and the pride of place which we accord to him is not a case of wrong valuation which does serious harm to religion. I should like to see our College, while it pays all becoming reverence to its doctors and scholars, openly recognize that its first and absorbing aim, without which all else is failure, is just the training of the common man to be a helper and not a hinderer in the world's struggle towards the light. This is not a weak yielding to ignorance—nothing that we do here must be anything but thorough. It springs from a real anxiety to discover a bridge across the chasm between the life of this place, with its steady pursuit of learning, its academic ambitions and its own standards of failure and success, and the unquiet world beyond its walls, where in a few short months its students are to put their hands to the creative work of love, taking their place, however unworthy, in the front rank of the glorious company of teachers. That great Head Master, Sanderson of Oundle, used to describe his aim as an educator in these words: "Real live education—boys marched up to the frontier of the unknown—to go into the world as pioneers—Darwins—Listers." That describes it exactly. The impossibly high aim, and life equipped all round to pursue it. All our work and training here should conspire to that end.

I have almost finished, and I feel how little I have said that is worthy of your thought or remembrance. All I have done is to give you a glimpse here and there into the working of my own mind, as it has been stung into activity by new experience. Perhaps it was not worth while doing at all until I had something more helpful to say. But the task was laid upon me, and it had to be attempted.

Let me in closing assume for a moment the rôle of an older man and leave with you some words which life, the great mother of wisdom, has taught me. This is the kind of thing which I overhear when I am talking with my own heart. Do not take the academic mind with you into the ministry. Remember that men are far more interested in life than in books, and don't be bookish in your sermons. Never neglect the ceaseless calls of friendship or a human cry for help. The triumphs of the pulpit and the platform lose their savour very quickly, but a rich pastoral experience is unwasting treasure. Do not be professional in manner. The saving salt of the ministry is not a posture or a uniform, but naturalness and sincerity. Try always to regard yourself humorously. Make friends not only with solemn books of devotion but also with such as are rich in laughter. Many ministers who fail miserably in their task belong to the company of non-laughers, "Men who are," as George Meredith says, "in that respect as dead bodies, which if you prick them do not bleed." In regard to money, think very little about it. If you possess it, be generous in your gifts. Do as many things as possible not for wages but just for the love of doing them. It may be great gladness to walk unencumbered through the world in company with the little ones of Jesus Christ.

But these are trite maxims; they have been spoken often before; and what you want is a great appeal to your loyalty, something big enough to make everything worth while. Well, here it is. I give it you again in the words of Sanderson of Oundle. He is referring to some biting sentences of Ruskin in which it is pointed out how the muse of history has coupled together the words Peace and Selfishness, Peace and Sensuality, Peace and Death. "This," he exclaims, "is the prophet's call to arise and awake out of

sleep; to abandon the easy life of routine and routine's belief. It is a call to rise up and breathe life into the dry bones of the past; it is the trumpet-blast for active warfare against all things that have become lifeless and dead. It is the herald call for a new army, to build up a new world of active, creative, dynamic Peace." It would be hard to find words which describe better the desperate need of the present hour and the urge of love which is driving you forward. You are to be creators of a new world of dynamic Peace. This is to be the fruit of the travail of your souls. None of your pursuits in this place, its friendships or its studies, are just ends in themselves. They gain all their value from this—that they may help to make you efficient organs of the Spirit, to link your purpose with the divine purpose in the world, and to fashion your lives into instruments which the love of God can use in the work of his new creation.